

SYLVA BRITANNICA

DESCRIPTION OF THE PLATES.

PLATE I.—THE SWILCAR-LAWN OAK.

THE OAK, admirable alike for its beauty and utility, has ever been distinguished as the greatest of all the trees of which it may be considered to reign with undisputed sway, both for its beauty and its longevity.

The Oak was held sacred by the Greeks, the Romans, the Gauls, and the Britons. At Rome it was dedicated to Jove; among the ancient Britons, its consecrated shade was devoted to the ceremonies of the Druids; and scarcely is it held in less veneration by their descendants, the interest of which it may be despoiled by the passing away of the superstitions connected with it. It is revived in those present to them, by the ideas of British power, and British independence, associated with the image of the British Oak, in the minds of Englishmen; who see in every branch from its branching arms,

Those sapling oaks which at Britannia's call
May heave their trunks mature into the main,
And float the bulwarks of her liberty.—MASON.

In proportion as the Oak is valued above all other trees, so is the English Oak esteemed in other countries, for its particular characteristics of hardness and toughness; qualities, which so admirably adapted it to ship-building, and which are thus admirably expressed in two epithets by that great poet, to Nature, and of the human heart, seemed alike laid open.

Thou rather with thy sharp and sulph'rous bolt,
Split'st the unweedyable and gnarled Oak,
Than the soft myrtle.—SHAKESPEARE.

The Oak is to be found in all soils; its growth, however, greatly depends on the nature of the soil; it may be planted; for though the hardness of its infancy is such as to render choice or care necessary, yet as it advances towards maturity, the depth and extent to which it strikes its roots, its magnitude and vigor depend on the congenial and uninterrupted field it may find for its power.

Under favorable circumstances, the Oak attains an age far beyond that which has been popular belief, viz. an hundred years for its growth, an hundred for its maturity, and an hundred for its decay. The Swilcar Oak, represented in the accompanying engraving, is known, by historical documents, to be six hundred years old; and it is still far from being in the last stage of decay.

This venerable tree stands in Needwood Forest, in Staffordshire. Its girth, at the height of six feet from the ground, is twenty-one feet four inches and a half. Fifty-four years ago it was girthed in by a laboring man still living, and measured at that time nineteen feet. It has been celebrated by several modern bards; among whom may be particularized Mr. Mundy, whose mention of "Needwood Forest," drew forth so elegant a compliment to himself, and so animated an apostrophe to the subject of his verse, from the pen of Doctor Darwin, that it is hoped but little apology will be necessary for introducing the lines containing them, as the most appropriate conclusion to this article.

"Gigantic Oak! whose wrinkled form hath stood,
Age after age, the patriarch of the wood!—
Thou, who hast seen a thousand springs unfold
Their ravel'd buds, and dip their flowers in gold;
Ten thousand times yon moon re-light her horn,
And that bright star of evening gild the morn!—

"Ere, when the Druid-bards with silver hair
Pour'd round thy trunk the melody of prayer;
When chiefs and heroes join'd the kneeling throng,
And choral virgins trill'd the adorning song;
While harps responsive rung amid the glade,
And holy echoes thrill'd thy vaulted shade;
Say, did such dulcet notes arrest thy gales,
As Mundy pours along the list'ning vales?

"Gigantic Oak! thy hoary head sublime
Erewhile must perish in the wrecks of time
Should round thy brow innocuous light
And no fierce whirlwinds shake the stem
Yet shalt Thou fall!—thy leafy tresses
And those bare shatter'd antlers strew
Arm after arm shall leave the mouldering
And thy firm fibres crumble into dust!

"But Mundy's verse shall consecrate thy shade
And rising forests envy SWILCAR's fame
Green shall thy germs expand, thy branches
And bloom for ever in th' immortal lay